

SURGEONS ON PACKET SHIPS.

RESOLUTION

RELATIVE

To the safety of emigrants on board of packet ships, &c.

APRIL 6, 1846.

Read, and referred to the Committee on Commerce.

Resolved, That the Committee on Commerce be directed to take into their immediate consideration the annexed statement of Dr. Richard Fraser respecting the frequent occurrence of smallpox and other contagious diseases on board emigrant packet ships, and his suggestions in regard to the measures proper to be adopted for the safety of emigrants and passengers on board such ships and the inhabitants of the cities where they arrive; and that the committee report by bill or otherwise.

Report on the ship Hottinguer, Captain Ira Bursley, which sailed from Liverpool on the 6th day of May, 1845, by Richard Fraser, surgeon.

Having been requested by Mrs. Maury, of Liverpool, and the other cabin passengers, as well as Captain Bursley, to draw up a statement of facts which occurred on the Hottinguer during her voyage from Liverpool to New York, and to subjoin therewith my own private opinions, I now beg most respectfully to lay before them the following details:

The Hottinguer sailed from Liverpool on the 6th of May, 1845, having on board 397 steerage passengers, a crew of 22 sailors with 4 officers of the ship, and 6 cabin passengers. Of the steerage passengers one-eighth were infants; a very small proportion of these, as well as of the adults, had undergone vaccination. On the eighth day after departure, two children were seized with the smallpox, which quickly developed itself in the most virulent form. Of course, this infection had been imbibed previously to coming on board. Their respective ages were five and seven; neither of these children had been vaccinated. These cases both terminated fatally. It is impossible to describe the dismay which prevailed throughout the ship; nor was this dismay unfounded, because, notwithstanding every precaution that might be taken, the probability was that, had the voyage been prolonged another week, many would have fallen victims to the disease. In justice to Captain Bursley, I wish to state that he most cordially adopted every suggestion that I made to him both

for the comfort of the patients and for the safety of the ship. The bodies were thrown overboard the instant that life had ceased ; their beds, bed-clothes, and linen were also thrown into the sea, and their berths purified with burnt tar. But, notwithstanding these precautions, even now (two days after landing) seven of the steerage passengers have been attacked with the smallpox ; and Mrs. Maury herself, the instigator of the present report, has been a sufferer from varioloid. These cases have been under my own care since landing ; how many more may have broken out it would be impossible to state. Mrs. Maury's son, a boy of fourteen, has also had a slight attack of varioloid.

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Were this a solitary case, less importance would of course attach to it ; but I have made the subject a matter of inquiry, and find that it is of constant and daily recurrence in all the emigrant vessels upon the Atlantic.

I attribute the yearly visitation of this deplorable malady, the smallpox, in the cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and other ports, in a great measure to the landing of emigrants from vessels in which the disease has been raging. No quarantine examination can be efficient in this case, because smallpox will lurk in the system many days before it appears externally, or before the patient even feels himself indisposed.

It is customary for the American emigrant ships to carry a full complement of passengers without a surgeon on board ; neither is the health of the passengers ever inquired into ; still less is it considered requisite that they should be vaccinated.

From these circumstances, I am led to the following suggestions :

1st. That every emigrant ship be compelled to carry a surgeon, who shall examine into the supply of medicines necessary for the cure of the most probable kinds of disease which may occur.

2d. That every passenger immediately after coming on board be submitted to vaccination, although he may have previously gone through this operation, because vaccination produces no personal inconvenience, and because it has been found that it invariably modifies, though it does not always prevent, the varioloid and smallpox. Mrs. Maury and her son had each of them been twice vaccinated. The patients under vaccination would suffer no more at sea than they would on land.

3d. That a small surgery be allotted to the use of the surgeon, where he may receive his patients in private. This is urged for manifest reasons of propriety.

4th. That no emigrant, laboring under any infectious or contagious disease, be allowed to sail in any vessel, because, where so large a number of persons is congregated together, and confined for a length of time, it is probable that disease of some description will break out ; the risk and fatality attending it depending on the malignity of its nature, the means available for cure, and the length of the voyage.

There will be no difficulty in procuring surgeons for these vessels at a trifling expense, because many young practitioners would gladly avail themselves, for a very small remuneration, of the opportunities thus offered to improve their knowledge and experience, and thus also they would be enabled to proceed to Europe for the purpose of enlarging their acquaintance there with professional men, and practise while the vessel remained in port.

RICHARD FRASER.

NEW YORK, June 8, 1845.

Dr. Richard Fraser, now of New York, the author of the above report, was accidentally a passenger on board the Hottinguer; and, when the small-pox broke out, he announced himself a surgeon, and volunteered, from motives of charity, to take charge of the ship. Dr. Fraser was educated in the medical schools of Edinburgh, and had previously practised in Glasgow.



